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An Inheritance to Children's Children :

A

DISCOURSE

OCCASIONED BY THE

DEATH OF MRS. SARAH THAYER.

Preached at Lancaster,

JUNE 28, 1857, THE SUNDAY AFTER HER FUNERAL.

BY GEORGE M. BARTOL.

Printed by Request. •

BOSTON:

PRINTED BY JOHN WILSON AND SON,

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DISCOURSE.

Prov. xiii. 22: "AN INHERITANCE TO CHILDREN'S CHILDREN."

THE book from which these words are taken is a collection of wise and moral sayings. It is the gathered result, no doubt, of much observation and experience of actual life. It consists not merely of proverbs, which, strictly speaking, are a kind of enigma, but contains also various maxims, comparisons, and brief sentences; and the meaning is expressed sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively, but generally in an antithetical, sententious, and poetic style. From the very nature of the composition, there is, in some parts, but little coherence between the different verses and paragraphs. Portions, however, are in the form of a continuous discourse; and we may say, that one general design runs through the whole book. This design is to inculcate an early love and earnest desire of real wisdom, and to lay down concise rules for the practical conduct of persons in all orders, estates, and

conditions of life. These rules include the great moral and religious duties, — the main parts of our obligation to God and to our neighbor; and are enforced by an abundant enumeration of motives to obedience. Hardly less than every advantage that a man can reasonably desire in this life is held out as the recompense of all who practise them, — the divine favor and protection, the testimony of a good conscience, courage and confidence, safety from evil, long life, health, plenty, riches, honors, present reputation and posthumous fame, and an inheritance that shall descend to children's children.

Here are ample promises indeed; but they relate to this world, and seem confined to it. They hold up, moreover, selfish and prudential motives, rather than those of the love of piety and virtue for their own sake; and so exclusively, that the morality of the system to which they belong will not bear a comparison with that of Christianity.

The religion of the book of Proverbs, however, though the light of immortality had not clearly risen upon its authors, shows, when compared with that of the heathen world, a very remarkable superiority. It acknowledges Jehovah as the Ruler and Governor of the world, the approver of virtue, and the punisher of evil-doers. It represents the Divine Providence as universal, and ever active. Nor let us hastily conclude, because its promises to the wise and upright ever seem to fall short in the performance, — nay, are

some of them evidently unfulfilled in many cases, — that therefore they are all alike weak and fallacious as motives to the duties recommended. For though the rewards which it proposes to well-doing are not all and invariably bestowed, yet does it remain certain, that for the most part, and generally speaking, piety and virtue produce present advantages. They do so by their own natural tendency, and by a fixed law. The one thing is bound to the other by the same chain of necessity which binds every cause to its effect.

Is it not true, for example, is it not the verification of our own observation and experience, even as it is the declaration of the ancient text, that the good leave an inheritance to children's children? It is a part of their praise, that they are thoughtful of their posterity. They are careful to do well for those who come after them, not by withholding more than is meet, but by prudent management and a decent frugality; and especially careful are they, whatever property or worldly estate they may devise, that the blessing of Heaven to justice and charity should go with it.

True it is, also, that this hope to leave behind some material provision may be disappointed. Yet is there a legacy, compared with which outward fortune is a trifle, — one not so easily lost or spent, but going down from generation to generation. It is a good character and name; and these not as external things,

or in the justifiable satisfaction and pride alone which one's offspring may have in them; but as an inward and inalienable treasure, in their inevitable influence and legitimate effect—far beyond that of any mere verbal advice or plan of life—upon the purpose, style of thought, and moral disposition, of those to whom they descend. Nor, in fact, is this inheritance which the good leave confined to those who follow them in the line of natural succession. It is something in which sons and daughters are not the only, although, if worthy, they are peculiar sharers. It is a common bequest. It is bestowed upon all who will take it. It is a spiritual wealth, divided without being diminished, used without being exhausted.

It may never, then, be an unprofitable subject for us all to contemplate. Especially fitting is it that it should engage our meditations, when Providence itself has made the occasion, and offers the theme. For I need not say, my friends, that my thoughts have been called into this train by the mortal departure from us, during the past week, of one who has left, to her children and to us, this more precious inheritance than gold and silver. Nor can I err in supposing that you expect my discourse this morning to be shaped by this event. Indeed, I could not, with any justice to my own feelings, suffer the present opportunity to pass without its particular improvement. I count it an unspeakable satisfaction that I can join

with this whole church and community in any tribute to one who has laid us all under so profound a sense of obligation, by what she has done and what she has been; and that I am now permitted to call attention to some sketch, however hasty and imperfect from the circumstances of the case it must be, of her life and character.

SARAH TOPPAN was born at Hampton, N.H., the 18th of May, 1775, in the excited interval of the battles of Lexington and Bunker Hill; and fell asleep, never again to awake on earth, one week ago this morning, although her actual decease did not take place until the afternoon of the day succeeding.

For more than sixty years since she left the circle of her early home, — than which there was no other, at that time, of higher distinction in her native State, — and united her life and her fortunes with those of my revered predecessor in the ministry of this church. I need not say how zealously, how efficiently, how holily and unblamably, she has discharged her office.

During this long period, what changes in the face of the congregation here! what changes in the character and condition of the parish! But, through every change and through every trial, steadfast as her stay under the same domestic roof, her own example, whether in public or in private, has never shifted or wavered. In truth, though she never spoke of sacrifices, yet devotion to duty, fidelity to every private tie,

and justice to every public call, have been the great lesson of her life.

Whether we consider the unusual term of years during which she occupied this position of influence, the numerous relations she sustained, or her special intellectual and moral gifts, the good she has accomplished is not readily to be estimated. Nor would it be less difficult to describe the work she has done because its performance and benefit have partaken in some measure of that secrecy which must always belong to woman's sphere. Her connection with the town was, in a certain sense, official; yet, rather than by any public demonstrations, her impression was made indirectly, in countless unostentatious deeds, and by the quiet infusion of her spirit through every sphere of social and religious influence. But the grandest operations in the moral world, as well as the physical, make their mark and produce their effects silently; and her impression was not the less deep and permanent because it did not noisily announce itself, though not so sufficiently regarded, perhaps, as it would otherwise have been. Called suddenly to such a duty, I may not now be able to delineate her character in its just and complete proportions; and yet some mention, however unworthy, of its more obvious traits, must not at this time be omitted.

And I think I may say, that I have never known a purer soul, or one that distinguished between good

and bad in all things more unerringly. She had that instinctive sense of the right and becoming, upon which things really evil cannot pass themselves off, under shapes however comely; which distances all that is vulgar, and drives far away each thing of sin and guilt. I call it an instinctive sense. And yet this spiritual tact depended in her, as it must in all cases depend, mainly upon habitual fidelity to conscience; for, however moral constitutions may differ, that sentiment of right and wrong, which God has planted in us all, can be a true monitor and unerring guide only in proportion as we trust to it and keep it pure. Constant obedience sharpens its sight to a continually nicer discrimination; to a detection of falseness and wrong where they had been unsuspected; to a perception, through every disguise and combination, of what elements all propositions and all actions are made up.

As the result of such fidelity and obedience, large was the measure of spiritual discernment and practical wisdom possessed by our honored friend. I believe I do not exaggerate in saying, that in her existed a very remarkable union of simplicity and godly sincerity, with the keenest perception of character, and the soundest judgment of men and things. And yet her charity never failed. She made (what so few make) every due allowance for the necessary weakness and imperfection of human nature. She had no scorn, but only pity and compassion, for the frailties

and infirmities of her fellow-creatures. Still was her spirit always stirred within her at the knowledge of any instance of injustice or oppression. Nothing to which God has given existence was indifferent to her: she delighted in every work of his hand. Simple beyond a doubt she was, — simple in all her manifestations and in all her tastes, — simple from habit, as well as by original constitution: but no complaint was ever made that her simplicity wanted discretion; or, if it were, it could have come only from the malicious or the undiscerning. It was the simplicity of truth; and so was a simplicity with which sagacity went hand in hand, and which never was imposed upon in the actual business of the world. It kept her affections always pure and healthy, and gave to her faith that wisdom which no sectarian logic can equal; which the discrepancies of dogmatists cannot cloud, or the expositions of sophistry pervert.

She did not get entangled among the thorny mazes of metaphysical divinity. She was satisfied with the plain facts of God's glorious revelation, without departing into a labyrinth of speculation. Obscure questions respecting the nature of God, Christ, or man, she postponed to the more practical themes of the divine character and dealings, and of human duty and destiny. But controverted points cannot be altogether avoided; and, so far as her opinions were distinctive, she was rooted and grounded in these upon what were to her full and sufficient

reasons: not as taking a one-sided view, still less as choosing a side from party motives; but because, with the best light she could obtain, and having allowed herself due time for deliberation, she had arrived at a sober decision. Yet, while she maintained her own honest opinion, and acted according thereto, she was willing to give those, who differed from her, credit for doing the like. She desired not, by any interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures she had adopted, to exclude others from the fullest enjoyment of theirs; and this as a matter not of prudence, or even of charity, but, before either, of simple and solemn justice to the rights of conscience, and to the spirit and precepts of the Christian religion. With no time-serving concession of principles, or yielding up of truths she thought should be maintained, she studied to be quiet and to do her own business, and strove to promote in all ways mutual forbearance and love.

Her piety and her benevolence were alike unstinted and unceasing. One striking feature in King Lemuel's picture of the excellent woman, I am sure, none of you can forget as belonging to her: "She stretched out her hand to the poor; yea, she reached forth her hands to the needy."

Truly she has been the mother of our Israel;- and never has her influence been more beneficent, or her own experience more happy, never has her interest in this church, or her regard for every good cause, been

more alive and active, than in her later years. Long will it be ere the grateful recollection thereof has faded. We need not pronounce her eulogy. She has praise of God, and a memorial in heaven. A book of remembrance is opened there, with the record of all her self-denying labors and self-forgetful excellence through the whole course of her earthly pilgrimage. All her fidelity to duty; all her prayers for divine help, and submissions to the divine will; all her patient belief and trust in her Maker's love and care, — are now laid open amid the acclamations of saints and angels; and no accumulation of our poor panegyric could add aught to her felicity in the divine approval and benediction.

Let us rather proceed to note, although in a necessarily brief detail, some particulars of our inheritance from such a life and character.

And we may describe it, in part, as an assurance of the reality of virtue. A multitude are always ready to say that all human motives are corrupt, and to excuse their own selfishness by maintaining, that, in more or less disguised or refined shapes, it is universal; that there is no such thing as self-sacrificing love in the world. No doubt, it is rare; but, were it not real, life would not be endurable. It is the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. As ten righteous persons would have saved all Sodom, so has the race ever been kept from destruction by the good who have belonged to it. Still are there many who sneer

at the mention of goodness; and their scepticism is the worst and most destructive shape of all infidelity; for it practically denies in us the existence of that capacity which is the very foundation of religion, and counts even the blood of the cross as a vain and unholy thing. Those, then, who, by their life and character, resist and refute this base and most atheistic supposition; who scatter any lingering doubts and fears in the minds of their fellows, — confer upon them a great benefit. And have we not known those who have thus helped to establish us in the true and comforting faith; who, whatever imperfections may still have remained in them, have given the proof which we have seen, that such a quality as disinterested virtue actually exists? Surely we have. Such proof has *she* given in her life who has now gone from us; and it is a part of the legacy we receive from her. Yes: in her we have indeed looked upon one in whom self-denial, generosity, and devotion to others, had left the region of abstractions, so that we could behold them, and know that they are no mere name or dream or imagination, but real, substantial things.

But again: she has left us, as another portion, her testimony to the value of a firm religious faith as the great support of virtue. She trusted not in her own independent and unaided strength. If, without deviation, she trod the path of duty and honor, she was free to confess she owed it to her religious faith in the

providence and the grace, the rectitude and the love, of God. It was not a faith dwelling among articles of doubt and disputation, indispensable to a true and saving faith as some may deem these; but a substantial confidence, inspired deepest of all from the divine truth and goodness so marvellously manifested in the life and victory, the spirit and power, the mighty works, pure precepts, and perfect example, of Jesus Christ, the heavenly Messenger. She took him for her Teacher, Guide, and Saviour, as he is clearly and distinctly set forth in these great offices. It is her witness, that the hope of human happiness and salvation is in his gospel: nor this merely as a verbal attestation; but a living assurance, in her own character, that the Christian religion, in her plain interpretation of it, is doing the work for which it was ordained.

And still again: from her counsel and example, we derive to our conviction a deeper sense of the importance of cherishing the various institutions of the Christian faith, and, as among these, of the importance to the general welfare, more especially, of a maintenance of public worship. The house of God was dear and precious to her. Her discoveries of truth, her praising of God and supplication of his mercy in the sanctuary, were among her chief joys. Her devotions through many years have added to the hallowing of this dedicated place of worship, which ought to be more venerable to us on her account. And it is her persuasion to us, deepened

in its force, as we now recall, in a fuller appreciation, all her faithful exertions in their behalf, that we should watch over and jealously guard these institutions; that we should take a noble pride in the peace and prosperity of our own sacred borders; that, standing fast in the faith of the gospel, we should bind ourselves together in brotherly love, build ourselves up in oneness of feeling and effort, and have a heart and a hand for the welfare of the Christian society to which we ourselves belong; and this not from any selfish or unworthy motive, but that we may magnify the glory of God's praise, and extend his kingdom of righteousness, truth, and peace.

Once more: let me mention the help we receive from such a life in realizing the great doctrine of immortality. Such excellence of character, we are persuaded, can never die. Many things — health, worldly reputation, bodily life — may be extinguished; but those virtues, we say, cannot perish. It is impossible that they should be put in any grave, or mingled with the decay of all things earthly. Not only Christianity, but human reason and affection, contradict and forbid it. The wicked and sensual do not help us thus to conceive of another life. Nothing comes out of them that asserts any deathless prerogative. They give proof of no holy cravings or anticipations to be met and satisfied. Their soul, “clotted with the contagion” of impure thoughts and low purposes, —

“Embodies and imbrutes, till she quite lose
The divine property of her first being;” —

and when the mortal part, to which they have compelled her to be a purveyor and vassal, is dissolved, it is sometimes difficult to imagine that this is not the end of them. Spirit itself is so associated and encumbered with flesh, and base, material things, that we can hardly think of it as any longer fitted or destined to endure. Instead of standing erect to heaven in the lofty consciousness of a divine relationship, they creep and grovel on the ground; and they seem to perish as the beasts. But, when we consider the righteous, their soul, aspiring by communion with God, by sacred meditation, by converse with all that is great and good and fair, appears already so to have laid hold on eternal life, that faith in its undying nature is easy and natural; and, when they depart, we almost hesitate to use the word “death” for what we can only regard as a translation.

Finally: do not the good bequeathe to us, in their character and example, the most moving of all exhortations to repentance, the most precious of all persuasions to piety and virtue? Their purity, benevolence, and devotion, — how these reprove and shame our habits of excess, our motives of self-interest, our prayerless deportment! Their righteous and holy life, — how it indicates at once the degrees of our inferiority, and the heights we might attain! What a desire it inspires and kindles in us to make the right

and true our choice, and to avoid whatever hinderance of sin and selfishness is turning us from the true aim and end of existence, — from the service of God, and the largest love of our fellow-men !

Is not such an inheritance as I have now endeavored to describe, my friends, one to be prized above any other ? Do we not owe more to the few persons who have realized in spirit and life our best ideas of fidelity, purity, charity, and faith, than to the intellectually great or wise or gifted for any thing that they have been able to do for us ? Should we not be grateful, as no words can utter, to the fellow-being who has really helped us to pray better, purpose better, and live better ? If the person who has conferred this inexpressible favor upon us has been a parent, it will live in our memory when the mass of the world's accidents has sunk into oblivion ; or, if not a natural parent, well may spiritual children rise up to call the parent of holy virtue blessed. And inasmuch as the bequest which the truly good make is never small or confined, although there may be nothing showy or boastful about it ; inasmuch as the few good names on the list of any community are its glory, — well may we hold such benefactors in grateful commemoration. Nay, most just and proper is it that honorable mention should be made of them in the house of God which they loved and frequented, and in the services of holy time ; for they have been representa-

tives to us of the truth and power of the gospel, and have helped our communion with the Eternal.

Of such a benefactor to this church and community, I have now been speaking, for myself and for you; because, in our sense of the worth of her character and the value of her influence, we could not be content without some special and united expression of it.

We have not dwelt upon that character and influence in her more private relations with those to whom the loss is nearest and greatest. Their sorrow extends beyond our trace, into a sacred retreat which we cannot enter. We commend them to that divine Spirit who only can comfort and fill their souls.

Painful indeed is it to part with the love which has so long cheered, and the experienced wisdom which has guided; but let them and let us not mourn on her account, or, in the deep sense of our own bereavement, imagine that she has suffered any privation or loss. The day of her death has been the termination of all the trials and conflicts of the world. Her task is done. The long day of labor is closed. The hoary head, covered with honor, and serene in its setting radiance, has descended to the grave. All for which the wise can desire to live had been attained. The few years which might have been added to her mortal existence would probably have taken more than they could bring. We must rejoice over such a life; and we cannot mourn over such a death. Let us be glad

that she has lived thus long, and glad, too, that she has gone to her reward. In her outward vanishing, let us set up her spiritual image in the chambers of the breast, that it may revive and renew in us her devotion to God, and her love for every thing which he has made. By the eye of faith, let us behold her safe on the shore of that better country into which she has departed, and which she will never have to leave. Do not our bosoms swell with a holy dignity, in the thought that she has so lived in this our human society as to be fit for the abode of the heavenly Jerusalem? And shall we not remember, that, as her interest in us cannot fail, still may she exult in our honor, or blush at our shame? Rich, indeed, is our treasure, in the reflection of what her life has been and what it now is, if we receive and adopt it as a practical persuasion to accumulate more and more of the same virtues, graces, and affections in our own, and so make our memory blessed in a grateful recollection of our labors, and in something of the same immortal inheritance we have left behind, when we go hence to be here no more.

